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Follow-up to policy decisions of the Economic and Social Council: working methods of the Statistical Commission

Report of the Bureau of the Statistical Commission on the review of working methods

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the Statistical Commission the report of the Bureau of the Statistical Commission on the review of the Commission's working methods. The report is transmitted to the Commission in accordance with a request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-fifth session.[a] The decisions of the Bureau on this matter are reflected in paragraph 17. The Commission may wish to comment on the report.

* E/CN.3/2005/1.

[a] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2004, Supplement No. 4* (E/2004/24), chap. V, para. 15 (b).

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Report of the Bureau of the Statistical Commission on the review of working methods

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I. Description of the process of reviewing the working methods

1. In its resolution 2003/6, the Economic and Social Council decided to take the necessary steps to implement the provisions of paragraph 46 of General Assembly resolution 57/270 B, in which the Assembly had requested each functional commission to examine its methods of work in order to better pursue the implementation of the outcomes of the major United Nations conferences and summits. The functional commissions were mandated to report to the Council no later than 2005 on the outcome of that examination.

2. At its thirty-fifth session, in 2004, the Commission asked its Bureau, with the assistance of the United Nations Statistics Division, to conduct such an examination and to report back to the Commission. It encouraged the Bureau to reach out to all members for input.[1]

3. As a consequence, the Chair of the Statistical Commission wrote a letter to all 77 country delegations who had participated in the thirty-fifth session of the Commission either as full members of the Commission or as observers to invite their comments on improving the current working methods of the Commission. The invitation to comment was also extended through the Secretariat to the international organizations of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities (CCSA), which usually participate in Commission sessions as observers. A total of 19 replies were received, almost without exception directly from — or in the name of — the chief statisticians of the respective member countries. The Bureau reviewed the replies and, with the assistance of the Secretariat, prepared the present report.

II. Reaffirmation of the leadership role of the Statistical Commission

4. The review of the working methods of the Statistical Commission was considered by many members and observer countries as a welcome opportunity to express their support for the Commission and to reaffirm its unique leadership role in the development of the global system of official statistics. The Commission is the only universal forum in which chief statisticians from all countries can participate in the process of approving international statistical standards and harmonizing statistical practices, classifications and frameworks. Without a strong Commission, regional solutions or those of subgroups of like-minded countries will emerge, neither of which are globally optimal.

5. The unique position of the Commission needs to be explained and promoted within the international community: it is the premier forum for strengthening statistics globally. This includes ensuring coherence and standards across statistical work undertaken within the United Nations, thus strengthening the ability of statistics to play a central role for the United Nations development strategies as expressed by the outcomes of the conferences and summits. The terms of reference of the Statistical Commission were last reviewed in 1971 (see annex). Some members felt that a reassessment of the terms of reference might be useful at this point in time. On the other hand, others felt that the current terms of reference are still broad enough to cover the current activities of the Commission.

III. Summary of suggestions made to improve working methods

A. Agenda content and structure

6. Most delegations expressed concern regarding the number of agenda items and documents to be considered by the Commission, and advocated for some form of prioritization or selection, such as (a) to remove non-contentious items — as determined by prior consultations with the delegations — and to focus on selected controversial issues, (b) to eliminate information items from the debate and reflect the relevant information in room documents, and (c) to let the Statistical Commission fulfil its parliamentary function quickly by adopting recommendations prepared by expert bodies without further debate. The current structure by subject matter is regarded to be responsible for a strong sense of repetitiveness from one year to another. Clustering and segmentation have been suggested as possible alternatives, distinguishing for instance between "decision", "discussion" and "information items", or between "formal business" and "emerging issues".

7. Seminar-type discussions were suggested, which would allow a more in-depth exchange on topics that command a wide interest among chief statisticians[2] (e.g., on population censuses, statistical organization, technical assistance, measuring the outputs of the informal sector, measurement of poverty, household survey capacity). It is important to retain a balance between issues relevant to the developed and the developing countries. Engaging member countries in the organization of such debates would ensure relevance and country focus and at the same time reduce the burden on the Secretariat.

B. Time management

8. Many delegations stressed the need for better time management. The allocation of time needs to be carefully planned by the Bureau according to the importance of the items discussed. The Chair needs to strictly implement the time plan, enforcing time limits for floor interventions, if necessary. A differential treatment between countries and international organizations in the time allocation was proposed. Introductory comments should be very brief and focus on relevant additional material that has been developed since the official submission of documentation, as well as on identifying key issues for discussion and decision. The reading of prepared statements (especially about activities in a particular country/organization) should not be allowed.

C. Documentation

9. Documentation could be improved — and reduced — by focusing on the key statistical issues regarding the subject matter area to be discussed. Each document should have an executive summary and be very specific on stating the action expected of the Commission. In general, the United Nations Statistics Division is strongly encouraged to exercise quality control for all documents submitted for the session. The importance of timely submission of official documents was also stressed to allow sufficient time for translation. Since the amount of information/room documents is increasing and is largely made available in English

only, it is important to also make these room documents available in time, i.e., at the latest on the first day of the session, to give non-English speaking delegations sufficient time to review them. The need for streamlining the reporting of city groups was emphasized.

D. Preparation of session report

10. The preparation of the session report is considered an important area in which improvements are needed, as it has proven difficult in recent years to agree on a draft text at the session. Practical proposals made range from a request for daily session reports to a suggestion for a formal process of adopting the report in writing within a three-week period after the conclusion of the session. One delegation pointed out that too much effort might be put into reaching a consensus position. Rather, if there are significant diverging views, they should be recognized as such in the report.

11. An important precondition for the successful preparation of the report is that a clear summary be presented at the conclusion of each agenda item. While many consider the Chair to be the main person responsible for that summary, he or she will need strong support from the Director and senior staff of the United Nations Statistics Division in this task.

E. Participation in the session

12. Various delegations considered it desirable to increase the number of developing countries who are represented at the Commission session by their chief statistician. Greater participation of statistical experts from the capitals of developing countries would be expected to ensure a balanced review of the substantive agenda items, taking into account the current statistical situation and needs in developing countries. It would also contribute to improving the quality of the discussion of statistical capacity-building, which is an annual agenda item of the Commission.[3] As funding constraints hinder the participation of experts from developing countries in international meetings, the Secretariat is encouraged to assist countries who wish to participate in finding the necessary resources.

13. In order to enable new delegates to fully and effectively participate in the proceedings of the session, it may be helpful to offer some support. This could take the form of a briefing by the Secretariat on Commission procedures targeted especially at new Commission members, offered on the day prior to the start of the session. In addition, supporting documentation, with relevant information for first-time participants, could be prepared and disseminated in advance.

F. Politicization

14. Several respondents voiced concern about the perceived increasing politicization of the Commission. There is a strong shared professional belief that the Commission can function best when focusing on its area of technical expertise, i.e., the development of statistical systems at the national and global levels. It is crucial to preserve the personal engagement of chief statisticians, who represent the

national statistical expertise that is indispensable for the improvement of statistical systems worldwide. Therefore, statements of a political nature are to be avoided in the Commission. In particular, it is proposed that the Chair not allow prepared statements on behalf of a group of countries. While countries are free to coordinate their positions on items on the agenda, the coordination process needs to take place entirely outside the sessions of the Commission. The Bureau, with the assistance of the Secretariat, is encouraged to anticipate potential political issues and should prepare for their resolution. It is essential that the Bureau in general and the Chair in particular be well supported by the Secretariat with respect to formal United Nations rules and procedures.

G. Relation with the Council and other functional commissions

15. It is important for the statistical community to maintain an effective dialogue with the Council and other functional commissions. In order to focus its own work, the Commission is looking to the Council to recognize the capability constraints of the statistical systems in many countries and to recognize the resulting need to establish policy priorities. Furthermore, a clear statement from a functional commission of its statistical needs, in particular before and after major United Nations events, would be a powerful influence on the work of the Commission.

16. While organizing an effective dialogue among intergovernmental bodies is always logistically challenging, various steps, such as shared documentation and meetings among the bureaux and secretariats, as well as shared sessions, need to be undertaken whenever possible and relevant. One specific proposal is to organize for the Bureau of the Commission on the Monday before the Commission session a one-hour briefing by representatives (or the secretariat) of other functional commissions on their statistical needs.

IV. Decisions

17. After reviewing the proposals made by various members of the Commission as summarized above, the Bureau decided to implement the following procedures for the thirty-sixth session of the Commission (the Commission will review the impact of these procedures when discussing the agenda for its thirty-seventh session and will decide on their future applicability:

(a) Introductory statements for each agenda item will be limited to a maximum of five minutes. Once an item has been introduced, a list of speakers will be established. If the list of registered speakers grows long in relation to the remaining time available for the agenda item, the Chair will impose time limits on floor interventions. Preference will be given to country representatives;

(b) A distinction between documents "for discussion" and "for information" will be made. There will be no introduction of information items. The Commission will be expected to take note of the information documents without further debate unless interventions are requested by one or more members;

(c) The Chair, assisted by the United Nations Statistics Division, will summarize the key conclusions after the debate of each agenda item. This summary

will form the basis for the session report; the objective remains to adopt the report on the last day of each session;

(d) The Statistics Division has agreed to organize a briefing for new Commission participants on the Monday before the start of the session;

(e) The Chair will not allow for the coordination of group positions to take place during regular session time;

(f) The Bureau will develop an agenda, including main topics, aiming to strike a balance between those topics that are of primary interest to developing countries and those that might be of more immediate relevance for developed countries. Alternative formats, such as seminar-style discussions, will be considered;

(g) The Bureau reaffirms that endorsing methodological recommendations is one of the most important functions of the Commission. However, the Bureau asks the Commission to refrain from reopening technical debates and to endorse technical recommendations prepared by expert groups unless a member country has strong and substantive objections;

(h) City group reports will be generally treated as information items unless there are any specific substantive or strategic issues to be discussed.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2004, Supplement No. 4* (E/2004/24), chap. V, para. 15 (b).

[2] The Conference of European Statisticians provides a model for this type of debate.

[3] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2004, Supplement No. 4* (E/2004/24), chap. V, para. 7 (g).

Annex

Note on the terms of reference of the Statistical Commission

1. On the basis of the recommendations of its nuclear session, the Statistical Commission was established and given terms of reference by the Economic and Social Council. The terms of reference as set forth in Economic and Social Council resolution 1566 (L) of 3 May 1971, reaffirming its resolution 8 (I) of 16 February 1946, as amended by resolution 8 (II) of 21 June 1946, state that the Commission shall assist the Council:

> "(a) In promoting the development of national statistics and the improvement of their comparability;
>
> "(b) In the coordination of the statistical work of specialized agencies;
>
> "(c) In the development of the central statistical services of the Secretariat;
>
> "(d) In advising the organs of the United Nations on general questions relating to the collection, analysis and dissemination of statistical information;
>
> "(e) In promoting the improvement of statistics and statistical methods generally."

2. In its resolution 1566 (L), the Council stressed the importance of the Commission's coordination function and the need to achieve an integrated system in the collection, processing and dissemination of international statistics; recognized the interest of the Statistical Commission and the United Nations Statistics Division in matters related to the use of computers in the United Nations system; and requested the Secretary-General to undertake, in cooperation with the specialized agencies, concerted action to assist the developing countries in strengthening their statistical systems.